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ABSTRACT

The Canadian population's belief in the values of effective leadership, proven competence, and responsive representation of society's interests have led to the development of an educational system in which (1) the central provincial government exercises greater power over education than do local boards, (2) local boards generally bow to the expertise of education professionals, and (3) the small size of their constituencies ensures that local boards will effectively represent local interests. The relative weight placed on the values of leadership, competence, and representation varies with social conditions. Current conditions affecting these values include a restrictive economy, an interdependent and mobile citizenry, demands for equity in educational achievement rather than in educational opportunity, expanding provincial control, growing teacher expertise and power, and increasing diversity in the demands made on schools. The current rebalancing of values could lead to a reduction in school board authority. On the other hand, a revival of concern for representation could lead to increased board authority. If the latter scenario is followed, school boards should consider (1) establishing voting wards within districts to enhance the representation of narrower constituencies, (2) becoming more active in party politics, (3) making sure key minorities are represented, and (4) ensuring teacher representation on the board. (PGD)

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REFLECTIONS ON THE POLITICAL FUTURE OF SCHOOL BOARDS

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REFLECTIONS ON THE POLITICAL FUTURE OF SCHOOL BOARDS

Reflections are thoughts, ideas or opinions formed as a result of meditation. They are intended to guide others in contemplation. To stimulate some contemplative activity about the political future of school boards, my reflections will be organized around three questions: (1) why do we have school boards? (2) how is their environment changing? and (3) what are their future prospects?

WHY DO WE HAVE SCHOOL BOARDS?

Our governmental structures and processes attempt to balance three values: leadership, competence and representation. *Leadership* refers to the demand for coordination to ensure effective and efficient delivery of programs and services. *Competence* refers to the demand that decisions be based on technical meritorious considerations. *Representation* refers to the demand that elected and appointed officials act in the interest of the represented in a manner responsive to them. These values in interaction have been influential in shaping school governance in Canada.

Belief in the value of leadership stems from the British North America Act and the supremacy accorded central government. The desire for strong central government soon became apparent in the provinces, particularly in their fields of exclusive jurisdiction like education. It was first given expression by Egerton Ryerson in Ontario over 100 years ago. He proposed that the province should take over the critical aspects of schooling -- teacher preparation, course content, textbook selection, school inspections, final examinations -- and that school boards should be responsible for hiring teachers and providing facilities. This Ontario approach gave rise to the prevailing general Canadian model of strong provincial ministries and relatively weak local school boards.

The value of competence affirms the ability of citizens to make choices about the general direction of school affairs. This value is further enhanced by the view that schools are a kind of specialized service agency, more akin to hospitals and universities than to municipalities. They do not directly serve the general public. Schools provide a service to a particular segment of the population. The nature of the service is such that the clients, as well as the general public, rarely

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A presentation by Dr. Walter H. Worth, Professor of Educational Administration, University of Alberta, to the Trustees' Academy of the British Columbia School Trustees' Association in Vancouver on November 21, 1986.

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know how it ought to be provided and must rely on the judgment of those providing it. Therefore, it should not be surprising, nor lamented, that school board operation is often characterized by deference of the members to the professional staff.

If professional expertise is decisive, and if the provincial government has the power, why do we bother having school boards? The answer to this question is rooted in the value of representation. Society, not the staff, "owns" the schools. Thus, society's interests must be represented. Indeed society's interests must be seen to prevail over self-interests in order to legitimate schools and their services, and to ensure continuing support for them from the public purse. The key to legitimacy lies in being responsive to the needs and preferences of the represented. Since responsiveness is basically a linkage or communication process, its effectiveness and efficiency varies inversely with the number to be represented and the variety of their interests. To provide for better representation and greater responsiveness, provincial governments maintained and created school boards to serve a smaller constituency with a narrow or specialized interest. Their existence is an assertion of the importance of the value of representation to Canadians.

The relative emphasis given the value of representation in relation to those of leadership and competence depends on social conditions. Also, heavy emphasis on one value over time tends to foster discontent and support for one of the other values as a remedy. The search for a balance in values suited to the times periodically results in significant adjustments in the structures and processes of school government.

HOW IS THEIR ENVIRONMENT CHANGING?

A number of forces promoting a re-balancing of values are now in evidence on the Canadian scene. These include an economic environment which demands greater efficiency and effectiveness, a social environment characterized by citizen interdependence and mobility, and an educational environment in which traditional concerns about inputs and access to opportunity are being supplanted by those related to outputs and equity in achievement. But three other forces are so pervasive and potent that they warrant brief elaboration instead of mere enumeration.

One is *expanding provincial control*. A significant way the province exercises control is by manipulating the resource dependency of school boards. When it wishes its preferences to

dominate, the provincial government as the major supplier of resources restricts the access of school boards to alternative sources of funds. Limiting or vetoing supplementary local taxation is frequently used for this purpose. By increasing a board's reliance on provincial funds, the province also increases the likelihood of the board's compliance with its preferences. As a result, the residual decision-making power and sphere of influence of the board is shaped and curtailed. This means of reasserting provincial control, and acknowledging ultimate accountability, has become the norm in Canada.

Another force for change is *growing teacher expertise and power*. As teachers have become better educated and more assured in their technology, they have also matured politically. They are aware of the community's social and economic dependence on their specialized occupational skills. Teachers are even more aware of the dependence of the school board and the superintendent on them for the implementation of policy. This awareness of their organizational "clout" provides a strong incentive for teachers to want to mold policy. In aspiring to share power and decision making at the district and school levels, teachers are mirroring the broader professionalization and employee-employer codetermination trends in our society.

A third force is the *increasing diversity of demands*. It is the product of demographic and cultural factors. Consolidation and urbanization have increased the heterogeneity of those to be served by a school district and decreased the proportion of board members to consitutents. Cultural pluralism, and higher levels of education and aspiration, have encouraged the expression of a wider range of preferences to be accommodated. Thus the stage is set for an intensification of interest-group activity and the articulation of more conflicting demands. While boards tend to "hear" such groups, they are often unable to aggregrate the conflicting preferences into acceptable policy. Boards are then accused of being "unresponsive". When diversity of demand is not accommodated or contained, it becomes the stimulus for change in both the membership of the school board and the manner in which it operates.

These environmental changes challenge the arrangements that have heretofore restrained political conflict by exposing different perceptions about the relative importance of the values of leadership, competence and representation. Consequently, we are being driven to seek alternative ways of reconciling the perennial value-based tensions in the governance of education -- tensions between governments, between societal and parental interests, between lay and professional power, between administrator and teacher power.

WHAT ARE THEIR FUTURE PROSPECTS?

It is highly improbable that the search for alternatives will lead to the abolition of school boards. The belief that some measure of local control contributes to the quality of education, the distrust of the "superior wisdom" of those remote from the scene of action, and the desire for a diffusion of power are just too strongly held by the electorate for provincial governments to ever deny school boards legal status. However, what is problematic is the nature of their status -- in law and in fact.

If the re-balancing of values continues on its present course, school boards are likely to remain or become little more than supplicants for funds, and paymasters for whatever funds are received from the province. Few capable persons will want to devote valuable time and energy to a government body which has so little authority to govern. The school board's slide downhill into obscurity will then accelerate. The centre of power will be the provincial ministry; the centre of controversy will be the neighbourhood school.

An alternative scenario is one in which school boards achieve higher status. The likelihood of this happening depends largely on ascendancy of the value of representation. Support for such a shift in balance is becoming evident in many provinces, including British Columbia. If support for the value of representation continues to grow, then there will likely be a delegation of substantial powers to the district level. Accordingly, *the political future of school boards will be one in which they are expected to represent the "internal" interests of students and staff, as well as the "external" interests of the community and other governments, and to deliver responsiveness to both.*

Meeting this expectation will be difficult for school boards without some rather fundamental changes in the selection and composition of their members. For the way in which a representative is chosen acts as a springboard for effective performance of the representation function -- acting in the interest of the represented in a manner responsive to them. My meditation suggests that at least four changes would be worthy of your contemplation.

One is the *establishment of single or multiple member wards within school districts*. Having a smaller, more clearly defined constituency with greater commonality in concerns, makes it easier for a board member to identify and transmit their preferences. It also increases both the opportunity and the obligation for each board member to be responsive to community preferences. For ward

residents, it provides more accessibility to a "local" person attuned to their wants and problems who will speak on their behalf. As sensible as a ward system seems, it is still opposed by some board members in many Canadian jurisdictions. The overt reason is fear of its potential for "balkanization", while the covert reason may be fear of greater accountability.

A second change is the *development and maintenance of political parties*. These might be the conventional national and provincial parties. However, they could also be other groups of people with shared aims and opinions organized together on a continuing basis to gain influence and public office. Political parties provide an initial articulation and aggregration of interests which aids both the electors and the elected. Electors are more likely to know what candidates stand for and can have some expectation that, if elected, they will pursue party-related policies. The party's platform also serves as a yardstick for use by the electorate in assessing the performance of those chosen as representatives. Those elected are more clearly aware of the expectations that they must try to meet. The party also provides them with a network for gathering and disseminating information. Political parties operate openly in a few jurisdictions and behind the scenes in some others. Temporary crypto-parties, which produce slates or lists of preferred candidates, also exist. This reality reinforces the fact that school governance is inescapably political. Perhaps the time has come for us to utilize the potential of political parties as a means to help provide responsive representation in educational affairs at the district level.

A third is to *make provision for representation of key minorities*. Under majority/plurality voting systems in single member wards, or at-large districts, members of ethnic, racial or ideological minorities are often underrepresented on school boards. Hence the full diversity of elector preferences goes unconsidered. One way to ensure a more accurate mirroring of all of the electors' preferences at the board table is through the use of proportional representation and a single transferable vote (a European practice) or preference scoring (an Australian approach). Another way to accommodate ethnic (e.g. francophones) or racial (e.g. native Indians) minorities is by designating a seat on the board for them. Either way, the articulation and aggregation of a broader range of constitutents' interests is facilitated and the risk of large-scale alienation is reduced.

A fourth, and even more controversial, change is to *make statutory provision for teacher representation on school boards*. Having some members of the professional staff of the district on the board would enlarge the pool of expertise for use in the policy process. It would also facilitate the articulation of student and staff interests. Additionally, the presence of teachers would assist in overcoming the "we-they" syndrome which is the source of much dysfunctional conflict. By

maintaining a substantial majority of public members on the board, the belief in lay control over the direction of schooling can still be honored. Similarly, the power of dissent of the local teachers' organization would not be jeopardized. Staff representation on governing boards has become a common and positive feature in postsecondary education. It appears to be an equally viable prospect for school boards.

A CONCLUDING REFLECTION

School boards are a unique North American invention with a long and honorable history. In 1766 the Legislature of Nova Scotia provided for the first delegation of responsibility for education to a local school board. By the time each of the provinces entered Confederation, school boards were well established in most of them. However, British Columbia was then, as now, a little "different". It was the first province to join Confederation with a non-sectarian system of public education. However, the system was centrally controlled. School boards did not come into existence until the passage of the Public Schools Act in 1872. But they were allocated few powers consonant with the Ontario approach brought to British Columbia by a disciple of Ryerson, your first provincial superintendent, John Jessop. A reluctance to share responsibility and authority, and a lack of genuine partnership, has been characteristic of the educational enterprise in this province ever since.

Perhaps the political winds of the next few years will temporarily, if not permanently, alter the course of your future history.